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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify the ways that superintendents in rural school districts deal successfully with restructuring. The analysis is based on interviews with superintendents and principals in four rural districts. The districts, in Texas and Oklahoma, were selected especially for their successful restructuring programs. The two Texas sites had begun decentralization into site-based decision-making before state authorities mandated the change. The Oklahoma sites had similarly initiated Outcome Based Education. For the purpose of this study, interviews revealed the following behaviors that the four superintendents held in common: (1) vision/awareness, an understanding of quality education and the awareness of the need for change; (2) vision sharing, the superintendent's communication of goals and strategies to the school board; (3) trust-building with teachers, principals, board members and the community; and (4) monitoring, to ensure that change is properly implemented. The four successful superintendents were active initiators and sustainers of innovative change, having actively sought out vehicles to improve learning opportunities. Each operated on a solid basis of trust with principals and teachers while demonstrating practical and enduring leadership. (TES)

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The Impact of Leadership Behavior of the Superintendent on Restructuring Rural Schools

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A Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the National Rural Education Association
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The Impact of Leadership Behavior of the Superintendent on Restructuring Rural Schools

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The ultimate test of practical leadership is the realization of intended, real change that meets people's enduring needs.

James McGregor Burns

Restructuring is a frequently advocated educational reform. While restructuring may take several forms, the most commonly advocated approaches involve a reconfiguration of school decision making and control through site based management or shared decision making . Restructuring is normally assumed to include such practices as decentralization of authority, greater staff participation in decision making, expanded options and choice for parents and students and more individualization of the educational process (Policy Notes, 1988).

The 1991 session of the Texas legislature mandated site based decision making as the restructuring model for all Texas school districts. Districts were responsible for submitting plans for implementing site based decision making to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) by September 1, 1992. For planning purposes, TEA defined site based decision making in these terms:

> Site-based decision making is a process for decentralizing decisions to improve the educational outcomes at every school campus through a collaborative effort by which principals, teachers, campus staff, district staff, parents and community representatives assess educational outcomes for all students, determine goals and strategies and ensure that strategies are implemented and adjusted to improve student performance (TEA Resource Guide, 1992, pg. II-1)

The ultimate goal of the mandate is the improvement of academic performance for all students.

A handful of school districts in the state already had site-based decision making models in place when the legislature acted, but these represent the exception rather than the rule. Of the 1,064 operating school districts in Texas, only a tiny minority had attempted some form of organizational restructuring prior to the legislative mandate.

Oklahoma too has mandated a single restructuring model, Outcomes Based Education (OBE). OBE was included in House Bill 1017 as one of several changes in Oklahoma public education recommended by a specially appointed group of business leaders and educators known as Task Force 2000. Like its neighbor to the south, few Oklahoma school districts had adopted the state

mandated change prior to legislative action .

Site based decision making and outcomes based education efforts are focused on the school site rather than on the central district administration. Indeed, the second wave of reform tends to ignore the contribution of the superintendent to change altogether, a situation which prompted Murphy (1991) to refer to the superintendent as "the Maytag Man" of school reform. When considered at all, superintendents are viewed as part of the problem with schools rather than as part of the solution.

Unfortunately, much of what has been written about superintendents and restructuring to date is not helpful. The literature is rarely based on extensive research (Hord, 1991), but tends rather to be anecdotal (Ingwerson, 1990) or admonitory in nature (Policy Notes, 1988). Equally important, the bulk of the existing research literature reflects the experiences of administrators in urban and suburban school districts. While superintendents of rural school districts share many of the characteristics of colleagues in larger school districts, there are important differences (Jacobson, 1986; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1989; Stephens & Turner, 1989). Finally, while much of the research focuses on the characteristics and behaviors of the superintendent, little attention has been directed toward the impact of the superintendent's behaviors on improving learning in the school district.

In order to better understand how superintendents in rural school districts deal with restructuring, the author conducted a series of interviews with superintendents and principals in four rural school districts. Two of these districts are located in Texas and two in Oklahoma. All four of the districts are "ahead of the curve" on state mandated restructuring activities in that they had initiated changes before their state legislatures mandated adoption. The interviews focused primarily on the leadership behaviors of the superintendent in bringing about restructuring and secondly on how restructuring effected the superintendent's working relationships with principals. The study proceeded on two assumptions: 1) that successful restructuring is primarily the result of the leadership behavior of the superintendent; and 2) that a superintendent in a small school district impacts learning opportunities for students most effectively through instructionally focused interactions with principals and teachers. For purposes of this study, a small rural school district is defined as one which enrolls fewer than 2500 students K-12 and is located approximately 25 miles outside of an urban center with a population of 50,000 or more (Stephens & Turner, pg. 4).

Research on Effective Superintendents

The typical superintendent tends to have fairly traditional perceptions of their own roles, which are often reinforced by school boards. As Hord (1991) points out, superintendents most often define their own role in terms of "financial responsibility, appropriate climate

development and curriculum design (pg. 28)" School boards tend to view the superintendent's role in much the same terms, but expect the superintendent to assume leadership in staff and personnel decisions and in other matters internal to the school organization. Cuban (1985), on the other hand, sees the superintendent filling three simultaneous roles : politician, manager and teacher. As a politician, the superintendent engages in those activities which support and further the school's mission. As a manager, s/he performs those tasks required for organizational stability. As a teacher, the superintendent works with board and staff to instruct them in their roles. Also included within the superintendent's "teaching" function is involvement with curriculum, instruction and program assessment.

Instructionally effective superintendents, as distinguished from typical superintendents, engage in certain types of behaviors. Murphy and Hallinger (1987) define these behaviors to include the following:

- Setting goals and establishing expectations and standards.
- Selecting staff
- Supervising and evaluating staff
- Establishing a clear instructional and curricular focus
- Insuring consistency in technical core activities, i.e. curriculum, instruction and budgeting
- Monitoring curriculum and instruction

The key to instructional effectiveness is the *personal* involvement of the superintendent in these key areas. Murphy and Hallinger note:

> [Instructionally effective superintendents] used a variety of both direct and indirect leadership tools.They controlled the development of goals both at the district and the school levels; they were influential in establishing procedures for the selection of staff; they took personal responsibility for the supervision and evaluation of principals; and they established and regularly monitored a district-wide instructional and curricular focus. (pg. 52)

One of the direct methods by which instructionally effective superintendents accomplish their goals is through the administrative control of building principals. (Murphy and Hallinger, 1987) This control is normally exercised through frequent site visitations which are designed to meet specific purposes. Among these purposes are:

- Checking and reviewing perceptions, systems, program implementation and facilities;
- Team building, communications, problem solving and knowledge building;
- Supervision and role modeling; and

- Alignment of building and district goals

Instructionally effective superintendents also collect work products from the schools and use large and small group meetings to examine the implementation of technical core activities by principals as part of their overall supervision and monitoring activities.

In one of the few studies investigating the leadership behaviors of instructionally effective superintendents of small school districts, Jacobson (1986) noted similarities between the role of the superintendent and that of a principal in an effective urban elementary school. While administrators in these two positions exhibited many of the same behaviors, (e.g. establishing clear organizational goals, involving faculty in planning, monitoring the performance of students and teachers, etc.), the superintendent also took on additional responsibilities. Most significant of these were the direction the superintendent provided to the overall educational program of the district and his/her efforts to mobilize staff, school board and community in the interests of improved instruction.

Principals are normally expected to be the instructional leaders of their schools. But empowering principals to exercise instructional leadership requires supportive behavior on the part of the superintendent. McCurdy (1983) summarizes what principals expect from the superintendent. The superintendent should:

- Foster open, two-way communication with principals. Principals want to be told what is expected of them and want to be able to use the superintendent as a sounding board for ideas.

- Provide more support, especially in setting goals, giving recognition for accomplishment and building confidence.

- Give principals more authority to try new approaches and take risks. Principals also want to be responsible for managing their buildings without interference and to be held accountable for results. Principals appreciate firmness in ends, but flexibility in means.

Principals also rate highly those superintendents who engage in joint principal/superintendent goal setting and who involve them in district decision making.

Hord (1992) summarizes much of the research on the behaviors of instructionally effective superintendents by noting that these administrators tend to engage in three key behaviors. First, instructionally effective superintendents create an atmosphere for change by challenging staff to generate ideas for improvement, by arranging and reinforcing exchange of ideas among staff and by supporting risk taking activities. Second, instructionally effective superintendents clearly communicate a vision for what the school district could become and keep that vision in the forefront with the board of education, principals, teachers and the

community. Finally, instructionally effective superintendents cultivate principals as colleagues by active involvement in principal selection and hiring, by being readily accessible to principals with no intervening administrative structures, by setting and consistently holding to clearly established expectations and by developing plans for principal's growth which are linked to district goals and to school needs.

Views from the Field : Four Case Studies

For purposes of this study, the author identified four rural school districts which were on the leading edge of restructuring efforts in their states. The districts were identified with the assistance of persons knowledgeable about their operation in the state's central education agency. Two of these districts were in Texas and had begun decentralization into site-based decision making before the Texas legislature mandated the change. One of these districts was in the north central part of the state and the other in the far southwest part of the state. Besides being at opposite ends of the state geographically, these districts were at opposite ends of the spectrum of wealth, ethnic composition of the community and tenure of the superintendent. The second pair of school districts was located in Oklahoma and, like their counterparts in Texas, had begun the change to Outcomes Based Education (OBE) before the legislature of that state acted. These two districts were closer together geographically, were more ethnically homogeneous and had superintendents with longer in-district tenure. In all four districts structured interviews were conducted with the superintendent and with one principal nominated by the superintendent. Three of the superintendents interviewed were male and one was female. Three female elementary principals and one male secondary principal were interviewed. Principals' tenure within their respective districts ranged from fourteen months to thirty years.

Analysis of the material from the interviews revealed a set of behaviors common to the four superintendents. These behaviors are designated "Vision/Awareness," "Vision Sharing," "Trust Building," and "Monitoring." Each of the designated categories contain subcategories of superintendent behavior which pertain to the superintendent's efforts to bring about change. Vision/Awareness behaviors indicate that the superintendent possesses a vision of quality education and is aware of the need for change in the school district. Furthermore, the superintendent has identified an appropriate vehicle for achieving the needed change and works actively to implement it. Vision Sharing includes those efforts of the superintendent to communicate the vision and the selected vehicle for change to the school board , the community, to principals and to teachers. Trust Building behaviors are those through which the superintendent establishes trust relationships, especially with principals and teachers but also with school board and community. Finally, Monitoring behaviors are those things the superintendent does to ensure that the change process is implemented properly. The superintendent's attention during monitoring is focused on principals, rather than on

teachers.

Vision/Awareness. An Oklahoma superintendent explained the Vision/Awareness stage of the change process in these words:

> I had an opportunity to serve on what was called Task Force 2000, which was a study panel authorized by the state legislature and the governor....And while I was serving on that at several of our sessions we brought in various researchers, people from across the county that were involved in various aspects of education and several things [began to] evolve in my mind and during that same time I had an opportunity to attend a COSA fall convention in which Dr. Bill Spade was one of the presenters....And when I saw...that a lot of the [information] I was given [by] Task Force 2000 [fit] under the umbrella of Spadey's model, things started to come together for me....

For another superintendent, this stage was triggered by dissatisfaction with other change efforts in the district:

> I went to an OBE information session...and it kind of got me started. Well, it just so happened that ...our superintendent's organization brought Spade in for an awareness session which I attended....the more I read about it [OBE], the more sense it made to me, the more I decided, hey, this is offering some promise...I didn't think anything we were [already] doing was really raising our ACT or SAT [scores], or raising our grade point average [or helping kids learn more]....

A Texas superintendent explained how her vision had been instrumental in securing her position:

> My personal philosophy has always been to involve others as much as possible in the decisions that affect them. When I was hired, in fact, the reason that I was hired was because I had a site based decision making philosophy so that coming here, I knew the main reason the board hired me is that I could document the fact that I had already implemented site based decision making...prior to coming here. That was the characteristic or philosophy that they were looking for.

From the principal's point of view, the superintendent's vision was the key element in initiating change in the district:

> ...he's a pusher and he always wants us to go further than what we're doing. And I think he had that vision that we're not meeting the needs of kids ....I have the notes

> from about the last five years of our [principals] meetings with him and it was always [about] having a vision, meeting the needs of all children, don't have your teachers have 15 years of one year experience, that kind of thing. I think he has that vision.

Finally, a Texas principal described her superintendent this way:

> She's open, she's a lady with vision. [She] will work with you, but wants to be sure that we don't get off track. That direction [i.e. site-based decision making] is there and I don't think that's all bad....she truly believes in what she's doing. And so you know, you get caught up in that....

The key elements in vision awareness, then, are a solid idea of what education is supposed to be, a discontent with the status quo in the school district, however ill defined that discontent might be, an awareness of a possible way to bring about change in the school district and the will to make change happen.

Vision Sharing. The second common pattern among the four superintendents studied was vision sharing. These superintendents actively communicated their vision to their school boards, community, principals and teachers. Once the idea of change had taken hold, each of the superintendents was eager to engage others. Passing the vision on was accomplished in several ways: talking to principals and teachers about it; relating the appropriate change vehicle to what was already being done in the classroom whenever possible; attending training sessions with principals and selected teachers ; and bringing the community into the change process in various ways and at an early stage.

One of the superintendents explained how he shared his vision with other administrators and teachers this way:

> ...And so I came back to [the district] and talked to the assistant superintendent about it [OBE]. [I] told him how I thought I saw some of these pieces coming together. Well, about the same time COSA ...set up a series of four one day workshops to provide additional information about outcome based education. So my assistant and I talked, we identified a team of about eight teachers to go with us to sit through these...workshops to see what it really was and if it had implications for [the district] and if it was something we wanted to look at. Well, the following year COSA expanded the OBE informational program...[W]e expanded our group to include 16 or 17 teachers. And as we had teachers participate, a lot of them saw a lot of merit and a lot of implications ...for improving our programs. So it was an outgrowth of teacher involvement in some training sessions that led them to want to adopt some [OBE] princples....

Another superintendent explained how principals in the district caught the vision:

> Well, initially...they were going [to OBE training sessions]...because that was what I thought was important. And they really didn't see a reason, didn't see a need for outcome based education at all....But I guess it was ...in the fourth training day I saw the lights go on all at the same time. It was just, all the lights went on just on the same day. They were saying, I can see that. And so they got in the groove and they've become [very active].

Involving board members in training sessions was also important to the success of these superintendents. One superintendent explained that not only was the board kept informed of what was happening in the district, but they were included in training sessions with teachers and administrators:

> They knew...more about outcome based education than probably 99% of the boards of the state of Oklahoma just because of what we had already done. And we kept them informed [of] what we were doing, plus having the board members go to that training, they knew a lot more than the majority of board members know. And when we finally made the presentation to them to get their blessings and adopt an implementation plan for the district, there were not that many questions because we brought them along as we went.

Parent involvement in the change process was also critical:

> ...[T]he parents were there with us and they went through those three days [of training] just like the teachers did and we treated them just like the teachers. And that was a good decision on our part [be]cause later ...before school started we had an open house and the teachers and the parents ran that open house as far as explaining...outcome based education.

In this instance, parental enthusiasm was so high that the superintendent noted "they are way out ahead of the teachers in wanting to make this thing go." More importantly, by involving parents early on and intimately in the change process, this school district was able to avoid some of the parental concerns which seem to accompany implementation of outcomes based education.

Not all of the superintendents involved parents in quite the same manner. A more common mechanism of involvement was to invite parents and community members to participate in a

more or less formalized goal setting process which produced a mission statement for the school district:

> [A]bout halfway through the second year... we felt like we were at a point where we were ready to go out into the community to tell the community what we were doing and to start to see if there was going to be community buy in. And we did that through the winter of that year with a series of public meetings...And it wasn't so much that we presented OBE as we went through a little scenario in which we asked them to help us define the future. And given that future, what are the requirements that kids need to have when they graduate from [high school] to function in the future....[W]e defined a mission statement and a series of key outcomes for the...school system. Well once with those defined then the public could see how those then would drive our outcome based education model.

Significantly, this district has experienced parental resistance to OBE which had to be countered with a strong communication program.

Trust Building. Trust building is the third common pattern among the superintendents. These superintendents built trust among principals and teachers by allowing them to try new ideas, by turning over limited decision making authority over staff development, personnel and budgeting to site based committees, by using principals and teachers as sounding boards and by supporting their decisions on critical matters.

One of the principals, a woman, put the issue of trust in these words:

> He's [the superintendent] very pro-active. But one nice thing about him, though, that I have appreciated. He respects my ability. I've worked under superintendents that would ask me to do something or want me to do it, but then would quiz me to death on how did you do it? They would not leave me alone on it. And he has, ever since he's been here. I guess I had to earn that respect. But he does not doubt, you know, you tell him something and he takes your word for it.

Another principal explains the results of trust this way:

> I feel that as long as I have talked with [the superintendent] about what we want to do and as long as my reasoning is sound and we can discuss the things that we want to do, I have his support. *I feel that having his support makes it so that I can work [more effectively] with my teachers*....I think its my job to make sure he maintains that trust. I think the things that I go to him with have to be credible and be the best thing for the children....

A Texas superintendent effectively summed up the trust building aspects of involving others in decision making:

> I think that I have found that the process has a lot of value....[Y]ou may turn out with exactly the same decision as central office may make but the involvement builds trust, camaraderie. [T]here are a lot of side effects that come out of the process that I don't think people value enough. You get to know your people, you get into the[ir] quality worlds a little bit better and they value you and you value them more. And so you build that team work. So yes, that was ultimately lying behind the thought of involvement.

Another superintendent described one of the more intriguing examples of a trust relationship:

> I think something else that surprised me was that...one of the elementary teachers [who] went through all of the training, and she and I worked well together, she [became] my sounding board. None of my principals...would tell [me] that, well, we may be going a little fast here. But Jeanette [would say] look at this for a minute. So we'd sit down and [I'd] say, we're not really ready for that are we? She'd say, I don't think so. You know, [I] was pushing to get things done that we really weren't ready to do. And I didn't see that and the principals didn't see it either, or they just weren't going to tell me.

Trust building can pay off in tangible ways for the superintendent.

Sometimes the superintendent supported the decisions of the principal and teachers when personal preference or convenience might have suggested otherwise. A principal explains:

> ...this year when I interviewed for a second grade teacher...I had two [teachers] in here with me interviewing. And we had two really good candidates and one of them was the new superintendent's wife in [a neighboring district]. Now that's pretty heavy. And the other one was ...just out of college. And I know [the superintendent], if he had his rathers, would have said, please hire the [superintendent's wife], but he never told me that. And I worried about it, [because] I knew which one I thought would fit best. The two teachers who helped interview...didn't want to say because they didn't want to put a lot of pressure on me. I made the decision and I went to him. [He had] interviewed both of them, too. But he left it up to me...[W]hen I told him which one and gave him my reasons he understood and I think he agreed with me. He never said one word to me to this day. I know he's...very pleased with the decision I made....[T]hat could have been a superintendent that would have told me..."I want you to do my friend a favor. I want you to hire his wife." But [he] didn't do that. Now...I was impressed.

Trust building means supporting the professional judgment and integrity of principals and teachers when the difficult decisons have to be made.

Monitoring. The final pattern discernable among the four superintendents is that each closely monitors the implementation of change in the schools. Most often, monitoring is accomplished through site visits, information sharing during principal's meetings, reinforcing principals in their new roles and though formal and informal evaluation procedures.

An principal described her superintendent's evaluation approach this way:

> Well, [the superintendent] visits the building ...during the year. He expects me to keep him informed and talk to him about anything that comes up that's different or a change or sometimes to review things that are ongoing. He's not very formal about the evaluation process. He talks with me, if there is anything that he's thinking, he dosen't wait until evaluation time. He calls me on the phone any time or talks with me here if he's [in the building]. Any time he has a concern or a question. It's kind of an ongoing thing. It's not just one time of the year or very formal.

Sometimes evaluation is more formal. An other principal remarked:

> Oh, well he's observing me all the time over here. And then he calls me in and he has a two page document...[H]e always has things that he's pleased about and then he has recommendations. There are always things you can do better. And they're on there.

A Texas principal reports:

> Site based management is part of what's in [the evaluation]. How we have initiated ...site based management, how we've involved personnel. We meet on a monthly basis and I carry documentation or we discuss how certain things have been done...And then after those meetings, in the spring, we have an [evaluation] meeting and its based on all [the things we discussed through the year. Her comments are] not how did you successfully do this, but what are you doing to reach those goals that are part of the goals of the district?

Some of the monitoring of progress toward change takes place through reinforcment of principals in their new roles. One superintendent describes his efforts to reinforce principals:

> The main thing we have done in terms of reinforcing is if a principal calls or we're having a discussion with the principal and [he says I] want to do something or I've decided to do this in my building, the first questions we ask is well, is that what the

> committee said or how did the committee feel?...We also want to know not just what the principal has decided, but what has the excellence committee decided or what has the site budget committee decided? Has this gone through that kind of a process and that kind of a screening? So I think that has helped to reinforce it. They don't just come up and say I've decided to change....

Occasionally monitoring requires the direct approach:

> There [have] been a few times where I just had to---when you try to get [a principal] to see that they've come to the wrong decision, that this is a better way to do something; its better for kids, its better for teachers, [but] he still didn't see it and I come along and just say well we're gonna do it that way anyway !

These four superintendents spend time in the schools on a weekly basis. Principals in the districts report that they feel comfortable having the superintendent in the building and that teachers are accustomed to having the superintendent visit classrooms. Moreover, both the superintendents and principals agree that implementing a planned change process played a significant role in principal evaluations. Superintendents in the districts studied were not content to play a passive role once a change had started; they were active role players and models in assisting principals and teachers through the change process.

Conclusion

Rather than being the forgotten "Maytag Man" of school reform which Murphy (1991) decries, the superintendents of these small rural school disticts were active initiators and sustainers of change. Each in their own style and in their own settings were effective innovators. Indeed, without their vision and direction, restructuring would not have begun. Not content to let change happen around them, these superintendents actively sought out a vehicle to improve learning opportunities for students in their districts. Each of the superintendents operates on a solid basis of trust with principals and teachers in their school districts and are involved on a daily basis with the evolving direction of change. They have demonstrated leadership of the most practical and enduring kind.

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